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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL IMMEDIATE 0254
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 0465
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA IMMEDIATE 1648

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000670

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2019

TAGS: PREL PTER AF PK SA YM

SUBJECT: SPECIAL ADVISOR HOLBROOKE'S MEETING WITH SAUDI ASSISTANT INTERIOR MINISTER PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN NAYEF

Classified By: CDA DAVID RUNDELL, 1.4(b), (d)

¶1. KEY POINTS:

-- (C) Ambassador Richard Holbrooke met in Riyadh May 16 with HRH Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MbN), Saudi Assistant Minister of the Interior.

-- (C) Holbrooke emphasized that Afghanistan and Pakistan should be treated as a closely inter-related problem. He stressed U.S. desire for stronger cooperation and a common U.S./Saudi approach to Pakistan based on economic assistance, encouraging cooperation between Pakistani political factions, and transforming the Pakistani army to fight a counterinsurgency war.

-- (C) MbN noted the Saudis viewed the Pakistan army as the strongest element for stability in the country. In reply Holbrooke emphasized U.S. support for Pakistan's democracy and said the U.S. opposed a military coup. MbN said he agreed.

-- (C) MbN described Yemen as a dangerous failed state and a growing threat to Saudi Arabia because it attracts Al-Qaeda (AQ), said Yemeni President Saleh is losing control, and outlined a Saudi strategy of co-opting Yemeni tribes with assistance projects.

-- (C) MbN strongly supported President Obama's decision to oppose release of photographs of U.S. detainee interrogations, saying release would provide a boon to AQ, and would be "the favor of their life."

PAKISTAN MUST NOT FAIL

¶2. (C) Holbrooke thanked the Prince for Saudi Arabia's \$700 million pledge at the April 17 Pakistan donors' conference in Japan. He said he had not come to make demands or requests but simply to begin a consultative process. The fact that three U.S. special envoys (Senator Mitchell, Dennis Ross, and now Holbrooke) have visited Saudi Arabia demonstrates the importance President Obama places on U.S./Saudi relations and the Saudi role in the region. Afghanistan and Pakistan were a major problem the new U.S. administration had inherited.

¶3. (C) Success in Afghanistan was essential for U.S. security as well as security in Europe and the Middle East, Holbrooke continued. The U.S. might be able to live with some degree of instability in Afghanistan, but not with an unstable Pakistan, because of Pakistan's nuclear arms, fragile politics, and relationship with India. He asked if Saudi Arabia shared this conclusion. MbN said "Absolutely," a comment echoed precisely in Holbrooke's subsequent meetings with King Abdullah and Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal

(septels). It's clear that Saudi Arabia has a "unique" relationship with Pakistan, Holbrooke said. He noted that over 800,000 Pakistanis live and work in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was especially important to Nawaz Sharif, the most popular politician in Pakistan. These were reasons why what happened in Pakistan was of direct concern to both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

¶4. (C) Holbrooke said the U.S. and Saudi Arabia shared a common purpose on Pakistan but not yet a "common collaboration." The purpose of his visit was thus to begin a dialogue on Pakistan and seek a common policy. Neither the U.S. nor Saudi Arabia could afford to let Pakistan fall apart. There were three important issues to address:

- Pakistan desperately needs economic assistance;
- Even though the Saudis preferred Nawaz Sharif, Sharif and Zardari need to be persuaded to work together;
- The Pakistan army needs to restructure itself to fight today's war against the Taliban rather than yesterday's war against India.

If Pakistan fell apart, Holbrooke said, the consequences for Saudi Arabia would be "unimaginable," especially if Pakistan's nuclear weapons fell into unfriendly hands. ("God forbid!" interjected the Prince.) "Under your leadership," Holbrooke told the Prince "Saudi Arabia has defeated terror, but if Pakistan falls apart, the result would be catastrophe."

¶5. (C) Holbrooke said the U.S. wanted to expand the U.S./Saudi relationship concerning Pakistan. Saudi Arabia could do a lot for Pakistan, he added, noting that economic

and social conditions in Pakistan created fertile ground for extremism. Zardari had many faults but he was democratically elected, so the U.S. tries to get him and Sharif to work together. Meanwhile, Holbrooke said, money for the Taliban flows in from the region.

¶6. (C) MbN said a vacuum in Islamabad would be dangerous. He described Pakistan army Chief of Staff General Kayani as a "decent man" who wanted to restore dignity to the army, and sought consensus support of all the civilian factions. The army was the Saudis' "winning horse," MbN said, but it needed to prepare to fight the current war against terror. Pakistani soldiers needed to be proud of their service, and not hide their identity as soldiers when they were off duty, MbN said. He had told Kayani that Pakistani troops needed to feel they were fighting for Pakistan and not the U.S. The Pakistani army had a "golden opportunity" because now Pakistan faced an external enemy. MbN emphasized that the army was Pakistan's "best bet" for stability. There were 800,000 Pakistanis and over one million Indians living in Saudi Arabia, MbN said, and millions more visited the Kingdom to make the Hajj pilgrimage, so anything that happened in Pakistan, or between Pakistan and India, was a threat to stability in Saudi Arabia.

¶7. (C) Holbrooke said he knew Kayani, with the Director of Pakistan's intelligence service (ISI), and General Pasha, and also Musharraf. He recalled the U.S. and Saudi Arabia had decided to support Musharraf in the aftermath of 9/11. This had been the right decision at the time but Musharraf had been a disappointment. The U.S. supported democracy in Pakistan, not any individual leader. Holbrooke repeated that the U.S. supported Zardari because he was elected, and emphasized that the U.S. was "100 percent opposed" to a military coup in Pakistan. MbN assured that Saudi Arabia would not support a coup either.

¶8. (C) He noted the U.S. agreed that corruption in Pakistan was an issue, but the U.S. had decided it was more important to help Pakistan. Attaching onerous conditions to assistance was a mistake, Holbrooke said. Since the U.S. and Saudi Arabia agreed on Pakistan's importance, the question was how to start working together. MbN answered that U.S./Saudi security cooperation should stay as it is, since

it had "never been better" despite past tensions. Each side knew its own business best, and the focus should be on obtaining results. MbN characterized Saudi cooperation with U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies as "one team."

¶ 9. (C) Holbrooke reiterated that terrorists in Pakistan were not under enough pressure and pressed the point that U.S./Saudi cooperation on Pakistan needed to rise to a higher level. MbN replied that he had asked King Abdullah for permission to maintain a "security channel" with the U.S. to remain open at all times to facilitate information exchange regardless of other issues in bilateral relations. The Prince added that the King despised the corruption he saw in Pakistan and this colored his views toward that country.

"WE HAVE A PROBLEM CALLED YEMEN"

¶ 10. (C) Moving to a new subject, the Prince said "We have a problem called Yemen." AQ has found fertile ground there, he said. The geography was similar to Afghanistan, and many Yemenis were more sympathetic to AQ's goals than were the Afghans. Yemen is also closer to AQ targets and recruiting grounds in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis had detected a pattern of individuals coming to the Kingdom for Hajj or Umrah and then traveling south to Yemen ("it's only 400 miles," he noted) for training before returning to their home countries. Saudi forces have arrested Egyptians and Algerians, among others, who were attempting to do this.

¶ 11. (C) MbN described Yemen as a failed state that is "very, very, extremely dangerous," and required focus. The Huthi tribes were Takfiri and Shi'a "like Hizballah South," he said. This was a threat forming around Saudi Arabia that required action now. The Saudis would like Saleh to be a strong leader, MbN said, but "his vision of Yemen has shrunk to Sana'a," and he was losing control over the rest of the country. Saleh's old advisors were gone and now he relied on his son and other younger men who did not have good connections with the Yemeni tribes. In contrast, Saudi Arabia had good connections with the tribes, MbN said.

¶ 12. (C) MbN said the Saudis had established a bilateral council with Yemen that met twice a year to consider assistance projects. The Saudi representatives were the

Crown prince and the oil minister (Note: Crown Prince Sultan has been incapacitated by illness for at least the past year; it is not clear whether the bilateral council has continued to meet in his absence.) Saudi assistance to Yemen was not in the form of cash payments, MbN said, since cash tended to end up in Swiss banks. Instead the Saudis backed projects in the tribal areas of Yemen where AQ was hiding. The idea was that when Yemenis saw the concrete benefits of these projects they would push their leaders to eject the extremists. Saudi Arabia was counting on this strategy, MbN said, to persuade Yemenis to see extremists as criminals rather than heroes. Holbrooke replied that the U.S. understood Saudi concerns about Yemen, and would work with the Saudis to address the problem there.

TERRORISTS STOLE OUR FAITH

¶ 13. (C) Turning to another issue, MbN recalled that the day following President Obama's inauguration, White House counterterrorism advisor Brennan had telephoned to assure him the new president was committed to continuing the war on terror. "Terrorists stole the most valuable things we have," said the Prince. "They took our faith and our children and used them to attack us." It had not been easy to see Saudi involvement in 9/11 and other terrorist incidents, he said. AQ was smart in wanting to hit both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. AQ's strategic goal was to hurt the U.S. and to take control of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina.

¶ 14. (C) MbN claimed that in 2003 radicals were present in "90 percent" of Saudi mosques. The current Saudi leadership had decided it needed to be on the front lines of the

struggle against terrorism, that the task could not be left to the next generation, since AQ gained momentum every time it succeeded. The Saudis realized they could not fight back without public support, he said, and developed a strategy of working with families of suicide bombers and other extremists who had been killed. This approach involved providing support to the families and telling them their sons had been "victims" and not "criminals." This gave the families "a way out" and

provided a public relations advantage to the government. "If you stop five but create fifty" new radicals, "that's dumb." MbN said. The Saudis measure their success against extremism by looking at levels of terrorist recruitment the number of successful operations, and they see a growing rejection of extremist violence. The Prince related an anecdote about an anti-terrorist operation in which the officer commanding Interior Ministry forces had discovered his cousin was the leader of the terrorists inside a surrounded building. MbN said he had offered to relieve the officer, but the latter had refused, and had insisted on leading the attack. The officer succeeded in defeating the terrorists while capturing his cousin alive.

¶115. (C) Saudi Arabia was not yet free of terrorism, MbN said. Thus it remained important to defeat the terrorists on the ground, in the media, and ideologically. The Saudis wanted to do this in cooperation with the U.S., the Prince said. Time was the key, and it was "not in our favor," he added, so "we need to work fast."

¶116. (C) On terrorist financing, MbN said "We are trying to do our best." Saudi Arabia has millions of visitors, especially during Hajj. The Saudis are making arrests, but are not making this public. Instead, the Saudi goal is to make the public aware that donations could go to the wrong places. MbN said that "if money wants to go" to terrorist causes, "it will go," and that terrorist attacks were inexpensive, "but let's make it harder." Holbrooke asked what the Saudis would do with Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia who financed terrorism. The Prince replied the suspects would be tried in Shari'a courts with Wahhabi judges so that the results of the judicial process could be used to condemn extremist ideology.

A BIG FAVOR TO AL-QAEDA

¶117. (C) Holbrooke explained that President Obama had decided to oppose release of 2000 photographs of U.S. interrogations of terrorist suspects on grounds of national security, and asked what the Saudi public reaction would be to publication of these photos. MbN responded "You bet!" it would be bad for security, and noted that following publication of the first Abu Ghraib photos, Saudi authorities had arrested 250 individuals trying to leave Saudi Arabia to join extremist groups in Afghanistan. Release of more pictures would give AQ "the favor of their life," said the

Prince. Saudi Arabia had fought very hard to defeat AQ on the Internet, but he couldn't see how to fight 2000 new photos.

¶118. (U) Meeting participants

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¶19. (U) Amb. Holbrooke cleared this telegram.
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